

2018-04-13

Irish Journalists and Journalism during the American Civil War

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Recommended Citation

Foley, M. (2018) Irish Journalists and Journalism during the American Civil War, Paper presented at *Ireland's Great Hunger Museum*, Quinnipiac University, Hamden Connecticut, US, April 13th, 2018 .

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Irish Journalists and Journalism During the American Civil War.

Paper presented at Ireland's Great Hunger Museum, Quinnipiac University, Hamden Connecticut, US, April 13th, 2018

There has been much research on the Irish in the Civil War and an enormous amount on newspapers and journalism on the Civil War period, but little on Irish journalists or journalism and the Civil War, other than as sources. This paper is tentative in its conclusions and reflects the need for much more work to be undertaken in the area.

Context

By the end of the Great Irish Famine over two million people had emigrated from Ireland to the USA in ten years. The US census for 1860 described Irish emigration as an 'Exodus' caused by Famine. The Irish were discriminated against, much of it to do with their religion. Nativists and the Know Nothings fought to keep them out of public life and the US.

The 1850 census showed that 26 per cent of the population of New York were Irish born. At the outbreak of war it was estimated that 170,000 men joined the Union Army, many joining one of the 28 regiments that had Irish in the title. About 40,000 joined the Confederate Army.

The Famine Irish

The Famine Irish were poor and despised. They lived in disease-ridden areas such as the Five Points in lower Manhattan. About half were literate, high for immigrant people, though a number of them would have had little English, speaking only Irish. The Famine Irish were predominately Catholic, which added to their discrimination. Earlier immigration patterns had included protestant dissenters, who fled to America to escape religious persecution and some of the United Irishmen from the North were also radical Protestants. It is from this period, from the 1820s, that Irish nationalism and Irish identity becomes increasingly identified with Catholicism, an important point when looking at Irish journalism in the US

Irish journalists can be traced to the very beginnings of the United States. The US declaration of Independence was printed by John Dunlap from Strabane, who later founded a newspaper in Philadelphia, while Matthew Carey, a former editor of both the *Freeman's Journal* and the *Volunteer*

Journal in Dublin avoided prosecution and left for the US in 1784, and founded the *Pennsylvania Herald* in 1785 and the *Columbian Magazine* in 1786. He was also involved in defining the new American culture with his journal, *The American Museum*. He printed the first American version of the Catholic Douay bible, which he published in 48 parts, which subscribers could then have bound.

The Irish MP and co-founder of the *Cork Examiner*, John Francis Maguire, wrote in his book, *The Irish In America* in 1867 that "there are not many journals in the United States which are not, to a certain extent, under the control or influence of Irishmen or the sons of Irishmen."

US Journalism and the Civil War

But first the Civil War and journalism itself. The Civil War changed journalism profoundly. Its role and the role of the journalist was central to a war that was the first 'people's' War and the first industrial war, that is one that mobilised entire populations in either fighting or in the war effort and one that was able to kill so many people. It is the first instance in the world of modern warfare with deadly artillery shells, Gatling guns, bayonet charges combined with the indiscriminate killing of mechanized war. Newspaper coverage was important in ensuring vast numbers of people were willing to support the war. People became hungry for news because their fathers', brothers', uncles and husbands were at the front. The correspondents who covered the war have been criticised by among others, Philip Knightley (1976) author of the seminal work on war reporting, *The First Casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth maker*. He dismissed correspondents in the American Civil War as mere propagandists, equally bad on both sides. Some of them were shameless enough to accept payment from officers for favorable mention in dispatches. In their defence it might be suggested that they had no precedent to base their coverage on, they were more or less working it out as they went along.

One of the major changes was the telegraph and the role of news agencies. The North had the Associated Press (AP), and the South the Press Association (PA). Both had correspondents in the field, but our real interest is in the AP. It had to send news to all its clients and as newspapers at the time were hugely partisan it had to send something that was acceptable to Republican and Democrat, copperhead Democrats or War Democrat newspapers and all the versions of that, so the coverage had to be devoid of bias. The other change was due to the limits of technology, it broke down and was expensive, so we begin to see a style

of writing emerging that was non-partisan, terse in its style and favoured the most important news at the top for fear the telegraph would break down before the story got through. In other words we begin to see the emerging of a style that would later be called the summary lead. Newspapers were not ready for that style just yet, it would take another 30 years, or more, before the inverted pyramid became the norm in newspaper writing. Most newspapers took the AP copy and then made it wordy and longwinded as per the style of the time.

The war also led to the first by-lines being used, so the military could track who was reporting from the front line. Often the reporters used pseudonyms or nom de guerres.

The look of the newspapers changed also. Illustrations had been used since the early 1840s, since the founding of the *Illustrated London News* in 1842, but they came into their own during the war as we see with this exhibition here at Ireland's Great Hunger Museum, many of which appeared in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. The straight up and down column layout was also challenged as newspapermen had to find places for maps that explained what was going on at Antietam, Bull Run, Shiloh or Gettysburg. The desire for news meant special editions, evening editions and Sunday editions were common. As an indication of the importance of newspapers to people's lives, the lawyer, Oliver Wendell Holmes is meant to have remarked: 'We must have something to eat, and the papers to read. Everything else we can give up' (Atlantic Monthly, Sept 8th 1861)

The war had a positive impact on journalism. No standard of what constituted a journalist existed before the war. By the end reporting methods, writing styles and journalism practices changed as journalists found new ways to cover something of such complexity and importance. The war was the biggest event in people's lives and nothing was too little or unimportant, so journalists, learnt to write about camp life, how soldiers entertained themselves, about picket duty and guard duty and military punishments. This is a small example and I think a very powerful piece of writing.

Men fired into each other's faces, not five feet apart. There are bayonet-trusts, sabre-strokes, pistol shots...oaths, yell, curses, hurrahs, shouting...men going down on their hands and knees, spinning round like tops, throwing out their arms, gulping up blood, falling legless, armless, headless. There are ghastly heaps of dead men. Seconds are centuries, minutes ages; but the thin line

does not break! *Boston Journal*, Charles Coffin, quoted in J Culter Andrews; *The North Reports the civil War*, Pittsburgh Uni of Pittburgh Press 1955 429-430

Irish Journalism in the US

Those of the Famine generation who did go into journalism were similar to those in journalism at home in Ireland. They were male, middle class, interested or involved in politics. Many, such as John Savage were members of Young Ireland and had taken part in the rising of 1848 and had been writing for nationalist newspapers such as the radical Dublin newspaper, the *Tribune*. He also produced a newspaper called the *Patriot* that was suppressed. He escaped to the US after attempting a raid upon a police barracks in Co Waterford. In New York he was first a proof reader with the *New York Tribune* and later a principal leader writer with *States Journal* in Washington. Like so many Irish journalists he fought in the Civil War, he was with the 69th New York Regiment. After the war he returned to journalism, wrote and published poetry, was involved in the Irish revolutionary organisation, the Fenians. He was also a lecturer in what became Fordham University.

Along with the likes of John Savage there were fellow Young Irelanders, Thomas Francis Meagher and John Mitchel. Meagher was involved with the *Nation* and also in the rising in 1848. He was transported to Australia and escaped to the US, where he became a huge celebrity, fated not just by the Irish but by American's generally. He was involved in the *Citizen* newspaper with John Mitchel, who I will come to. Meagher also founded the *Irish News*, which he dedicated to the 'Smudge Faced imigrant of the tenement and beyond'.

Though Meagher favoured an ecumenical Irish nationalism and was often at loggerheads with the Roman Catholic Church though he agreed with it in its defence of the Union.

It is not only our duty to America, but also to Ireland. We could not hope to succeed in our effort to make Ireland a Republic without the moral and material support of the liberty-loving citizens of these United States.

— *Thomas Francis Meagher On deciding to fight for the Union*

Meagher was to fight in the Union army rather than with a pen though. With the Civil War he was commissioned in the 69th New York regiment, also known as the Irish Brigade, then commanded by fellow young

Irelander, Michael Corcoran. After Corocran's capture at Bull Run, Meagher became Brigadier General of the Irish Brigade. After the war he was made Acting Govenor of Montanna Territory and died in mysterious circumstances. While he is peripheral to our story his journey was somewhat typical. He started out prior to the war sympathetic to the the South, but when Fort Sumpter was attacked rowed in with the Union. (see Timothy Egan, *Immortal Irishman; the Irish Revolutionary who Became an American hero*, A biography of Meagher published in 2017)

John Mitchel was one of the most famous, and controversial, Irish nationalists in the US and also one of the most atypical, in that he was protestant, a middle class intellectual, he was more radical in terms of his anti British stance and, unlike the bulk of Irish emmigrants, actually returned to Ireland.

Mitchel was an extreme Irish nationalist who was the first to suggest the Irish Famine was deliberately caused by the British, (God sent the potato blight but the English created the famine) the precurer of those who claim it was genocide. His anti-English and extreme nationalism was probably formented by a visit to the West of Ireland in 1847, at the height of the famine. His 1873 book *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*, accused the British of deliberate murder.

He was also an ethusiastic supporter of slavery and believed in the inate inferiority of the African American. He claimed the slaves of the Southern states were better cared for and fed than Irish cottiers or industrial workers in British cities such as Manchester. His Jail Journal, an account of his imprisonment has never been out of print and is a remarkable addition to Irish nationalist literature.

As his most recent biographer, Bryan P McGovern said in his 2009 book JM, Irish nationalist Southern secessionist:

He was a man who represented the tortuous relationships between industrialization, nationalism, imperialism and racism. He advocated Irish independence but had no qualms supporting African slavery. He called for revolution by peasants but, as a bourgeois gentleman, he also believed in an organic, hierarchical

society and rarely wanted to associate with the masses. He despised the inequities of capitalism and industrialization, but he loathed socialism....It was Mitchel's belief in a romantic, ecumenical nationalism that influenced his ideology not only in Ireland but also in the United States (The often puzzling, at least to the Irish in Ireland, adherence by many Irish Americans to both a conservative stance at home and radical Irish nationalism can probably be traced to Mitchel, who claimed to be both.)

Or as he wrote himself in his newspaper, the *Citizen* in New York in 1856:

He would be a bad Irishman who voted for principles which jeopardized the present freedom of a nation of white men, for the vague forlorn hope of elevating blacks to a level for which it is at least problematical whether God and nature ever intended them."

Mitchel was from Camnash, Co Derry and grew up in Newry. His father was a Presbyterian clergyman. He became a lawyer and defended Catholics. He later joined the Young Irelanders in Dublin wrote for the *Nation* and founded his own paper, the more extreme Nationalist newspaper, the *United Irishman*. Only 16 editions appeared before he was arrested and sentenced, by a packed jury, to transportation to Van Diemen's land in 1848. In 1853 he escaped and travelled to the US and New York. He founded the *Citizen*, a radical nationalist newspaper that was known for its defence of slavery.

The *Citizen*, with Mitchel as editor also had other Young Irelanders as contributors. Its purpose was to introduce a radical hatred of Britain while informing the Irish in America of news from back home and helping them adapt to their new country and culture and with job listings.

The generation of Irish nationalists who arrived in US following the 1848 rising helped transform Irish America from a predominantly constitutional variety to supporting physical force.

Mitchel left with his family for Tennessee leaving John McClenahan as editor. His and his family's life in Tennessee was a sort of back to nature move, much in line with his Romanticism. He travelled giving lectures, while Jenny, his wife was left in the wilderness with his children.

He founded the *Southern Citizen*, advocated a radical southern nationalism and the reopening of the slave trade. McGovern suggests he advanced the course of Irish nationalism and slavery to improve the status of Irish Americans. He hoped to provoke a war between the States and then a war between Britain and the US. Ireland, he maintained would look to the south as a society facing oppression from the North and then would model its republic on the southern model. The *Southern Citizen* ceases publishing in 1859. The following year he became a US citizen and was now working for the *Charleston Mercury*. He later became editor of the *Richmond Inquirer* but lost his position because of his criticism of the President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis's handling of the war. He moved to the anti Davis newspaper, the *Richmond Examiner*. He lost two sons who fought for the Confederacy, one was at Fort Sumpter.

After the war he became editor of the *New York Daily News*, a pro southern newspaper. He was arrested and became disillusioned with the Confederacy. After his release he worked for the Fenians in Paris for a while but returns and founds the *Irish Citizen* in 1867. The very name indicates increasing bitterness with the US, in that this newspaper appears to advocate retaining one's Irish identity. Mitchel distances himself from Fenianism, partly because he thought it too Catholic and not the sort of ecumenical nationalism that had been favoured by Young Ireland and especially Mitchel in the 1840s.

The *Irish Citizen* ceased publication in July 1872. He returned to Ireland, stood for parliament but died at home in Newry in 1875, aged 59. His obituary in the *Irish World* described him as a 'Brilliant writer but an unsuccessful journalist'.

Mitchel is clearly an important figure in Irish nationalism and politics, but in terms of Irish America he is important because he is in reality he held views that were just an extreme version of views held by many Irish American journalists.

One very influential newspaper was *The Pilot* in Boston. The *Pilot* was/is not officially an Irish newspaper at all, but much to the disappointment of the young Ireland generation of Irish nationalists, Irish and Catholic has become synonymous and would remain so for some time to come. *The Pilot* was the most important Catholic newspaper in Boston and for all intents and purposes, the newspaper for the Irish in Boston.

As war was becoming inevitable the leaders of Irish Catholicism in places such as New York and Boston begin to advocate American citizenship

and support for the Union. Bishop Fitzpatrick (Fitzpatrick, unlike his Irish flock, was a strong defender both of the Union and Lincoln) and Archbishop John Hughes of New York, saw war as an opportunity for the despised Irish to show their loyalty to their new home by joining up and supporting the Union.

Irish media outlets were appalled at the election of Lincoln. Papers such as the *Pilot*, *The Irish American*, *The Freeman's Journal* in New York and the *Citizen* had denounced abolitionists, defended slavery and sympathised with the Southern viewpoint. At the same time they proclaimed their loyalty to the Constitution and the Union.

The Pilot on Jan 12th, 1861: ' We Catholics have only one course to adopt only one line to follow; stand by the Union; fight for the Union; die by the Union'. At the same time the paper was sympathetic to the South, who had been attacked by 'malign' abolitioners. The people of the south were merely seeking to have their lives and property protected against encroachment from the North.

The *Pilot* hoped for a peaceful settlement but once the Confederacy attacked Fort Sumter the *Pilot* was going to support the Union: We have hoisted the Stars and Stripes over the Pilot establishment and there they shall wave til the star of peace returns".

While the *Pilot* and its readers were unshaking in their support of the Union, not so when it came to Lincoln. The Emancipation proclamation in September 1863 after the victory at Antietam was greeted by the *Pilot* with dismay. Lincoln, *The Pilot* said, had sold out to the radical abolitionists of his party, the war would be prolonged as the South would resist, that there was not no chance of a negotiated peace and would cause a flood of black workers to the north. Blacks did not want to be emancipated, stated the *Pilot*. They were devoted to their owners and satisfied with their lot in life. Only 'negrophilists and 'nigger-worshippers' would try and convince Blacks that they were equal to whites.

But an indication of the Irish view of the war can be seen in this story from the *Pilot*. Just after dawn on the morning of April 27th 1861 the inhabitants of the Irish enclave of Boston's North End heard that a sailing vessel from Savannah Georgia had tied up displaying the flag of the confederacy. The ship, the *Manhattan*, was viewed as treasonous to the adopted northerners who had, since the attack on Fort Sumter two weeks earlier rallied to the union cause. Within hours a crowd had gathered

demanding the 'treasonable' colours be lowered and replaced with the stars and stripes. (Pilot May 4th 1861).

Another Irish journalist who ended up charged following his encouragement of resisting the draft and for publishing 'incendiary, disloyal and traitorous' articles. At the time of the anti-draft riots in which about 400 people were killed (Zinn, Howard, p236) was John Mullaly from Belfast. He migrated to the United States in the early 1850's, and, before he became editor of the *Metropolitan Record* in January, 1859, when he was about 24 years old, he had worked as a reporter for Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, William Cullen Bryant's *New York Evening Post*, and for James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald*. He acted as special correspondent for the *Herald* on the expeditions which laid the first cable across the Gulf of St. Lawrence. He was also special correspondent on the first three Atlantic cable expeditions of 1857 and 1858. In January 1859, Mullaly published the first issue of the *Metropolitan Record*, and continued publication until 1873.

After six years service on the *New York Herald*, Mullaly was described by the managing editor of that newspaper as an accomplished reporter. This reputation and the young newspaperman's acquaintance with Archbishop John J. Hughes of New York made possible the launching of Mullaly's newspaper venture, the *Metropolitan Record*. As early as 1858 Mullaly had determined to publish his own newspaper for New York's Irish Catholics. Archbishop Hughes endorsed his efforts and agreed to advance some money for the enterprise.

Reflecting Irish opinion, it supported the war until 1863 before becoming a Copperhead organ; Mullaly was then arrested for draft resistance. Even in an era of extremely partisan journalism, Copperhead newspapers were remarkable for their angry rhetoric. "A large majority [of Copperheads]," declared an Ohio editor, "can see no reason why they should be shot for the benefit of niggers and Abolitionists." If "the despot Lincoln" tried to ram abolition and conscription down the throats of white men, "he would meet with the fate he deserves: hung, shot, or burned."

On the question of continuing the war the Irish News York community was divided. The strong pro war *Irish American* was balanced by the *Metropolitan Record*, though both editorially opposed Lincoln and the Republicans.

There were a few very different Irish journalists. William Howard Russell, called the father of war correspondents, from Tallaght Co Dublin arrived in America as a correspondent for the London *Times*. He was already the most well know reporter in the English speaking world due to his coverage of the Crimea War (1853-56), coverage that led to the fall of one Government and the establishment of the War Department, as well as a range of military reforms. He came to the US at the start of the war and was feted by officials of both sides who were hoping *The Times* considerable influence would bring Britain out in support of one side or the other. *The Times* supported the Confederacy. His coverage and his letters from America were scrutinised and he was harried at every step and over every comma. He was vilified in the North for his account of the Northern retreat at Bull Run. While he said he admired much about the south he was appalled and disturbed at a Slave Auction stating ‘no sophistry could persuade me the man was not a man.’

He was threatened and denied access to battlefields. One of his crimes might well have been his style of un-bias reporting did not sit well with American newspapers at that stage.

Charles Graham Halpine from Oldcastle, Co Meath, entered Trinity College, Dublin, but the early death of his father forced him to leave and seek work as a journalist. He emigrated to the United States in the 1850s and had an illustrious career on the *Boston Post*, as a correspondent for the *New York Times* and the *New York Herald*. He also contributed humorous and literary articles to various journals. At the start of the war he joined the 69th New York Regiment as a Lieutenant and rose through the ranks and retired as a Brigadier General of Volunteers and returned to journalism. However, when a serving officer he wrote and published a huge range of material under the name of a fictional hero Irish private, Miles O’Reilly, 46th Regiment New York Volunteers. The *Irish American* declared that only the president was more well know than Miles O’Reilly. Halpine wrote humorous sketches of army life supposed to have been penned by 'Private Miles O'Reilly,'" which were published in Northern newspapers. Unlike so many real Irish privates in the Union army, Private O’Reilly supported the war and President Lincoln and also the right of African Americans to volunteer.

Two questions I think arise from this, why was journalism a popular calling for Irish and Irish Americans and what about the racism.

The racism of the Irish is something that leaves a lot of us feeling somewhat uncomfortable. John Mitchel’s racism was an ideological issue

based on his romantic ideals and a belief that an authentic republic was one based on collectivism and on peasant beliefs and values. In reality he might be seen as a proto fascist and maybe we should be having a similar conversation as Americans are having about commemoration.

The seeming racism of the Irish of places like the Five Points is a different matter. The radical historian, Howard Zinn, hardly an apologist for racism, asks how could these new Irish immigrants, themselves poor and despised, become sympathetic with the black slave who was becoming more and more the centre of attention and the subject of agitation in the country. Indeed, he says, most working class activists at the time ignore the plight of African Americans. 'Racist hostility became an easy substitute for class frustrations'

The Draft Riots are harder to explain. The draft law was clearly unequal. It offered those with money a way out. As well as being anti Black the rioters were hugely anti rich. In a way the Irish probably saw themselves as the subject of racism. In a confused way the draft riots were class riots, by a despised people who were not fully aware of whom its enemy was.

The Irish would continue to view journalism as a way up the social ladder and not just in the US. The Irish are overrepresented in both the UK and Australian journalism. In the US Journalism would become a rough trade under the likes of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, not just a place for middle class boys from Dublin, but a unionised workplace for the immigrants and their children, a place where a literate child from a culture that valued story telling could find a job without a college education.

In 1865, with the prospect of peace the strongly Fenian *Irish American* dreamt of uniting Irishmen, experienced soldiers from both sides, who had fought in the confederate as well as the Union armies, to overthrow British rule. But the dream of grand conquests fizzled in an unsuccessful invasion of Canada in May 1866. A later invasion in 1870 had the same result.

By then, most Irish Americans of the Civil War generation had come to identify with the US, whose soil had both absorb their blood and provided grounds for aspirations, while loyalty to the old country was probably fading into sentiment for St Patrick's Day. Of course involvement and loyalty to the Democratic Party meant a time would come when the Irish would dominate city politics.

Over time it became more difficult to deny the Irish a place in America. Memories of Copper Head politics and draft riots faded and there remained grave markers as evidence of Irishmen fighting and while in many respects Irish Americans had been in the wrong side in terms of policy, in the light of their service and sacrifice there was less reason than before to doubt that they were citizens and patriots of their adopted land.

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